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ABSTRACT

Reading programs in elementary and secondary schools are often ineffective because principals have not had adequate preparation to assume leadership roles in such programs and are therefore unable--or unwilling--to take control of the reading program. Successful reading programs are characterized by leadership, direction, and support from principals, who should work with their teachers to provide public relations, establish teacher assistant programs, implement needed inservice, and improve reading environments. Accordingly, this paper provides school administrators with the background information they need to create such an improved learning environment and become effective, innovative curriculum leaders for reading instruction. Principals are advised to learn the basic components of a successful reading program and to evaluate each teacher's ability to individualize instruction, motivate students, use questions to stimulate comprehension, and encourage enrichment or follow-up activities. Principals also need to know the primary methods used in teaching normal students how to read, including the basal reading series, phonics methods, language-experience approach, and initial teaching alphabet. The report concludes with a discussion of two special groups of students: the learning disabled and the gifted. A selected bibliography is included. (TE)

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# An Administrator's Overview for Teaching Reading

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In today's highly technical world, it is extremely important for all people to be able to read at a very high level. This ability to read is perhaps the single most important skill a person can acquire in a lifetime. While some children learn to read at home before beginning their formal education, the primary setting for most children to learn this skill is the school. And the person usually in charge of that setting is the principal.

Often, however, programs are not as effective as they can be because many principals have not had adequate professional preparation to assume leadership roles in elementary school reading programs, they lack experience as classroom teachers, and they do not provide adequate supervision of reading programs (Laffey and Kelly, 1983). At the same time these administrators often receive little help in putting together a balanced program. Few of their elementary reading (Chapter 1) or classroom teachers have reading certification, most have had but one or two (sometimes ineffective) undergraduate reading courses in college, and frequently these teachers do not want help from the principal, trusting their own instincts and skills in teaching reading over those of the administrator (Holly, 1987).

At the secondary level the problem is often worse. Few junior high or high school principals have formal training in reading, many feeling that the place to teach reading is the elementary rather than the junior high or high school classroom. And some secondary

classroom teachers agree, often to the point of criticizing elementary teachers for the "poor job" they do in preparing their students to read materials designed for junior high or high school students. With no pressure from his or her principal, the secondary teacher usually makes no effort to teach reading in the content area (Holly, 1987; Williams, 1987; Rauch, 1983).

This inability or lack of willingness on the part of principals and teachers to cooperate and take proprietorship of the total reading program is a serious problem. The principals at the elementary, junior high, and high school levels should work together with their teachers to provide positive public relations, establish teacher assistant programs, implement needed in-service and, most importantly, use his or her time and energy to improve reading environments (Rauch and Sanacore, 1984). The purpose of this research is to provide the school administrator with some necessary, basic background information so that he or she can create that improved learning environment and be an effective, innovative curriculum leader for reading instruction. Included will be information about successful reading programs and about the traditional methods for teaching normal students how to read. And because reading instruction is important to all students, this report will focus on two special groups of students -- the learning disabled and the gifted.

All successful reading programs receive "leadership, direction, and support" from the school administrator (Rauch, 1983). While reading instruction is by no means an exact science and there is no perfect program, there are some basic components found in all successful programs. These successful programs emphasize time on task

with the direct and systematic teaching of skills and the effort made by content area teachers to improve reading. The elementary programs average two hours per day on specific reading and language activities (Rauch, 1983).

These successful programs also include a planned reading program with good lessons which the principal observed and evaluated based on the teachers' ability to individualize instruction, motivate students, use a variety of questions to stimulate different levels of comprehension, and encourage enrichment or follow-up activities (Rauch, 1979).

Other components of successful programs include concerned content area teachers who make an effort to improve their skills and share their ideas, communities where parents get involved in their children's education, an evaluation program to monitor children's growth (Rauch, 1983), appropriate materials, and a positive and attractive setting for learning (Holly, 1987).

Armed with the knowledge of what makes successful programs, the principal next needs to know the primary methods or approaches to teaching reading to normal students. These include the basal reading series, phonics methods, language-experience approach, individualized reading, linguistic approach, and initial teaching alphabet.

Basal readers, "a sequential and interrelated set of books and supportive materials intended to provide the basic material for the development of fundamental reading skills," (Lerner, 1981) has been the primary method for teaching reading for the past forty years. Today, ninety to ninety-five percent of all elementary classrooms in the United States use the basal reading series despite the fact that

it has been criticized by many educators, media, parent groups, moralists, and women's groups for its "language, phonics presentation, story content, class appeal, pictures, qualities, and environment of the characters" (Lerner, 1981).

The other methods of reading instruction, used in five to ten percent of the classrooms in the United States, include the phonics method where students learn isolated letters and their sound equivalents and then synthesize these individual elements into whole words; the language-experience approach where the child dictates stories to the teacher who writes them down and then uses them as the basis for the child's first reading experience; individualized reading where each child selects his or her own books and then has the opportunity to read at an appropriate rate and conference with the teacher; the linguistic approach, which stresses decoding the phoneme-grapheme relationship and the sound system of the English language; and the initial teaching alphabet where forty-four characters each representing a different phoneme replace the normal alphabet (Lerner, 1981).

Once the school administrator understands what makes a successful reading program and what the methods are for teaching the normal student in the classroom, he or she is ready to focus on two special groups of students who have their own unique needs in reading, the learning disabled and the gifted.

Understanding the unique problems of learning disabled children as well as the laws related to learning disabilities is important for the school administrator. It was Samuel A. Kirk in 1962 who first used the term "learning disabilities" to draw attention to this

special group of people (Kirk and Kirk, 1983), a group that includes Albert Einstein, Nelson Rockefeller, and Thomas Edison, a group of approximately 1,285,000 school-age children who have normal or above normal intelligence but who cannot achieve at grade level without special help (Lerner, 1981). Kirk described a learning disability as a "retardation, disorder, or delayed development in one or more of the processes of speech, language, reading, spelling, writing, or arithmetic resulting from a possible dysfunction and/or emotional behavioral disturbance and not from mental retardation, sensory deprivation, or cultural or instructional factors" (Kirk, 1983).

In 1981 the National Joint Commission for Learning Disabilities revised Kirk's 1962 definition, describing learning disabilities as "a generic term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual and presumed to be due to central nervous dysfunction. Even though a learning disability may occur concommitantly with other handicapping conditions (e.g. sensory impairment, mental retardation, social and emotional disturbances) or environmental influences (e.g. cultural differences, insufficient/inappropriate instruction, psychogenic factors) it is not the direct result of those conditions or influences" (Hammill, et al., 1981).

The learning disability associated with reading is dyslexia, a problem which affects approximately fifteen to thirty of every five hundred children (Hynd and Hynd, 1984). Defining dyslexia has become a hotly debated topic in the reading community. "While there is

general agreement, at least among neuropsychologists, that there must be something wrong with the brains of extremely poor readers, there is not agreement as to what that something is. Controversy continues to exist as to whether the presumed neurological abnormality reflects a cerebral insult or a hereditary defect and whether it represents a developmental lag or a permanent deficit" (Dorman, 1985). But one thing seems certain. "The presence of brain damage or suspected brain damage as a basic component of dyslexia is . . . anatomically, neurologically, and hereditarily untenable" (Spache, 1981).

Elementary and secondary schools in all states are required by both federal and state laws to provide viable educational opportunities for all learning disabled students under twenty-two years of age. Public Law 94-142, signed into law by President Gerald Ford in 1975, provides for a "free and appropriate public education for all handicapped children regardless of their handicap, . . . [requires] that these related services be designed to assist the children in meeting their unique educational needs, [and finally required] that a written individualized educational program be developed for each child" (Harner, et al., 1978).

The states' counterparts, including Ohio's House Bill 455, require a "written educational plan for all handicapped children placed in special education, . . . multi-factored ciriteria for assignment to special education programs, . . . [and procedural safeguards to meet the due process requirements for each child, including] the right for parents to examine all records, the right for parents to have an independent educational evaluation of their children, prior written notice of any program modification, informal

and impartial hearings whenever required, and the right of appeal to State Board of Education and the courts" (Harner, et al., 1978).

A final step in the education of learning disabled students under Public Law 94-142 is preparing them for the barely charted areas of post high school education. Such preparation includes informing students of special services available to them such as untimed and taped Scholastic Aptitude Tests and American College Tests, "Talking Books," and colleges which assist LD students with special tutors and programs (Cardoni, 1982). It also includes preparing students with the study skills necessary for the rigors of college and giving students a list of college personnel and departments most sympathetic and helpful to LD students (Deeler, 1982). One of the real ironies is that many colleges are training teachers to teach the learning disabled but are not making the effort to teach the LD students themselves (Knowles and Knowles, 1983).

While preparing normal and learning disabled children to read seems like a natural thing for the administrator to do, he or she should also provide leadership to educate the gifted population of his school in a systematic way. The gifted, like the learning disabled, are a special and often misunderstood group. They include "children and, wherever applicable, youth who are identified at the preschool, elementary, or secondary level as possessing demonstrated or potential abilities that give evidence of high performance responsibility in areas such as intellectual, creative, specific academic, or leadership ability, or in the performing and visual arts, and who by reason thereof, require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school" (Hittleman, 1983).

Many teachers misunderstand their responsibility in teaching reading to gifted children who are mainstreamed into the regular classroom. Some assign independent work and provide little or no instruction, feeling that these students will somehow teach themselves. Others insist on teaching basic skills to these students with their classmates, even though the skills have already been mastered and the students are reading significantly above grade level. Unique, truly "differentiated" instruction must be provided for the gifted population (Carr, 1984).

Because teachers and administrators are often naive about gifted children and their strengths and weaknesses in reading, not all gifted children become capable readers. As a matter of fact, only about twenty percent of gifted pre-schoolers in one study learned to read on their own. Without instruction, even gifted students had trouble making inferences and grasping subtle meanings in stories. Even the gifted need an instructional program that is teacher - directed. The content of the books should be meaningful, varied, and challenging; the methods should involve higher levels of thinking; and the pace of the reading class should be accelerated (Carr, 1984).

The elementary, junior high, and high school principals, as the curriculum leaders, must be armed with the knowledge and the philosophy of what makes a successful reading program and what methods are available to teach reading. The end result will be that all students -- normal, learning disabled, and gifted -- will receive the appropriate training in reading so that they can function successfully in the highly complex and increasingly competitive world of the twenty - first century.

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